

## Text, Textuality and Interpretation

### An Interview with Michael Riffaterre

*Mishra: Professor Riffaterre, let me begin by asking: in your writings and in your recent lectures, you tend to give an almost mystical primacy to the text. The text, in other words, is more or less the ultimate source of authority and my question is, why are you so sure of this?*

Riffaterre: The text is a given. Criticism and literary theory would have no *raison d'être* if there were no text. They are a reflection on a reading experience. Texts have no mystical primacy. They are factual, concrete starting points, the most basic elemental feature of what we call literature. I will not except even oral literature; oral literature (a contradiction in terms, etymologically) exhibits the same kind of permanence and regularity that we observe in the text. To put it otherwise, oral literature is characterised by repeatability: the successive oral renditions of the score of an oral story or poem regularly run the gamut of basically unchanging components in an unchanging order. They follow a memorised model as faithfully as if the recitant were reading, except for some points he may gloss or expatiate upon. Thus I am not trying to give greater importance to the text, but simply to point out that the text is physically present first, or it is presupposed.

*It takes me immediately to perhaps a very simple question — do you presuppose a definition of a text?*

When we speak of presuppositions, we refer to what comes to the mind of a reader. As your question is phrased, it would have to be answered in terms of reader perception or reader response. Without going into this in detail, we can say that texts are susceptible of definition because there are a number of features that recur from text to text. I know of no literary text that does not have at least some of these features. I submit we must identify these features as universals of literariness. When there are variations, they belong to another level, that of generic features. Depending on the genre a text can be associated with, or be representative of, their number varies. Generic features are not necessarily universals. Rather they define specific modes of actualising the universals. The latter make it possible to define minimally a text.

But my real reason for underscoring the importance of the text is that its very textuality must be counted among the universals. It is a fact of experience that phrases, sentences, words can be found anywhere, everywhere, that present some aspects of literariness. They are sensed as literary, or as giving their context, their verbal environment, a literary flavour. In any culture, any user of a language will recognise such verbal components, which can be identified as literary, even though some may vary from one culture to another. These components, however, are not in

themselves sufficient to create literariness. They are elements of discourse, or fragments that appear in non-literary contexts, in newspaper articles, for instance, or in conversation, and they may evidence all other universals of literariness without yet being literary works of art. Only textuality achieves that; a partial quotation from literature, for example, is literary to some extent but not a work of art. We have to find a way to differentiate the work of art from those linguistic sequences that contain literary elements, to differentiate literature from literary discourse. The solution I propose is textuality. You may have all the other features, all the other universals, but if you don't have textuality, then you still do not have literature. Even a fragment is understood as something extracted from a text, or presupposing a text. A quotation, or a literary allusion also presuppose a text. Literature begins at the level of the text. Or better, the text (not the words, the trope or the sentence) is the basic unit of literature.

*So then, when you speak about textuality, are you really talking about the literariness of the text?*

I am referring to the function of the text as a unit of literature rather than to its function as a grammatical entity, as a sequence of sentences, or as a succession of meanings. *Text* refers to a linguistic entity, *textuality* to this entity as a factor relevant to the literary manipulation of language. Since most texts do not function as literary units, I would say that a text cannot embody textuality unless it be characterised by closure, by overdetermination, and by the fact that it is one unit of significance.

*This doesn't stop a fragment from being a text though.*

No, but a fragment is a mutilated text. It is a text without a beginning and without an end, or a beginning bereft of what it should introduce, or an ending that has lost that which led to it.

*Would you say that the concept of "textuality" — as a unit of significance or whatever — does not impose any limit on the size of a text? A text could take the form of a two-line poem or an eighteen-book epic.*

Yes, of course. A text may be very short. In fact, certain literary genres demand brevity: in these, one of the generic features which I mentioned before is that the text must be brief. Aphorisms and maxims belong in that category. Of course, it is not enough to speak of a few sentences. Brevity is combined with other elements: for instance, not only must the text be pithy but it must make a point with a sharp, unexpected twist. Another such genre, I suppose, would be the distich in Greek and Latin literature. The elegiac distich was truly a genre, since it had an ethos in that only certain topics were possible, and since there was a link between the metric characteristics of the distich and what it expressed.

*It takes me to a related question arising out of the kinds of definitions you have given to the text. Some people would claim that given that kind of a position, theory is nothing more than a parasitic exercise. It's a parasite on a text and it must always be parasitic without any claims to any quasi-philosophical autonomy of its own.*

Well I don't know about the philosophical autonomy. I don't know about autonomy, period. Theory is parasitic only if it could be said that the reader is parasitic to the text. I don't think that it is a proper view, for both reader and text are essential and inseparable. Theory is rather a different way of approaching literature. Criticism is the evaluative, sometimes normative, way of approaching it. A critic is supposed to tell people why they should like or dislike a literary piece. I find this a very daring attitude, and I admire those people who can glibly say: this is good, this is bad. This kind of assertion plays an important role in the teaching of literature. Rather than a cognitive procedure, literary criticism is a behavioural reaction to literature or any other art.

Now you have philology, which purports to examine the physical features of texts, whether these features are literary or not, and the way texts are bequeathed from one generation to another. All this is quite important but not germane to the study of literature's literariness.

Theory is entirely different. First, theory focuses on relevancy. Second, it addresses very general problems — problems that transcend genres, aesthetic schools or movements. It tries to define, for example, under what conditions a literary text survives the disappearance of its first readers, of the civilisation that gave rise to it, and of the aesthetic system that made it acceptable. Theory also considers the text's survival despite conflicts or incompatibilities among the various ideological interpretations to which it is open. Theory's final step in this connection is to determine what in the text is left that is basic, not residual, once we discount external conditions and the idiosyncrasies of response.

It is necessary to adopt a theoretical point of view because the fashionable word in criticism, "approaches," is tainted by its national or historical origins. Approaches are ideologically oriented. It has been suggested, quite wrongly, that theory too is ideologically oriented because it is said to reflect an ideology of no choice among ideologies. On the contrary, theory considers all possible choices, and the point at which they cease to be relevant. Theory also tries to determine at what point the text ceases to be literary, or whether there is such a point. It also seeks to discover the point at which a text begins to be literary, assuming that our perception of literariness is a progressive experience. All these questions are best examined by going beyond the *hic et nunc* of the literary event. Otherwise (and this has been the sad story of literary history) we tend to substitute history for literary history, and literary history for the study of permanent aspects of literature.

*Well, we started off by talking about the issue, or the claim, that could be made about the parasitic nature of theory; but related to it, you raised a very interesting problematic, and that's the relation between criticism and theory itself. The claim you made is that criticism is primarily evaluative — it's a question of judgement and taste — and that theory is more like a description of systems.*

It is an attempt to determine what systems are possible, and a description of actual systems — including the systems known as literary

criticism. If theory is to be consistent with its aims, it also has to explain and *predict* the behaviour of any type of reader, and therefore that of the literary critic as well. The literary critic is, after all, a glorified reader — or should be one: a reader with the range that enables him to compare works of literature in a comparison that may even go beyond the limits of what has been thus far or is now accepted as literature. So theory should be able to find a place for the critic in its scheme, to teach the reader the following: what happens to the literary text when a critic goes after it; what happens to the critic himself when he reads a text; the areas of justifiable criticism; the areas of gratuitous criticism; when we can say the criticism is parasitic, and when legitimate. Theory can even ask whether or not a critic has a defensible right to pan a work of art.

*But in the teaching profession, do you see criticism and theory as two different ways of examining texts?*

Two different phases, or stages, in the process. It would be a good thing for anyone who has anything to do with literature, or is in the teaching profession, to take a healthy dose of theory. That is certainly what we are trying to do at Columbia, where we created general courses of literature that have nothing to do with the teaching of literature within the “national” departments: Eastern languages, French, German, and so on. Nor do these courses have anything to do with the teaching of comparative literature. Comparative literature tends to compare specifics. Theory does use a comparative method, but not in order to come back to the particulars of a given text. It uses it to arrive at an abstract, generalised view of a system. By the way, theory should ultimately encompass comparative literature, since comparative literature comprises, in not quite equal terms, literary history and evaluative criticism.

*But what happens to the kinds of claims that are made by, say, traditional English Departments, where professors claim that they are critics and therefore what they're doing is a study of individual texts? When they say, “We evaluate texts, we show students how to make similar kinds of judgements about texts,” are they mistaken?*

They are not mistaken in their aims. They certainly are mistaken when they believe that it is enough to be a “practitioner” to get somewhere: a mere pragmatic association with literature yields relevant explanations only by chance. Many teachers explain a text or build an evaluation of an author on principles that are valid for sociology or social history, or history in general, without ever asking whether these principles are applicable to this special being that is a text. A text can be defined from the viewpoint of the historian and from the viewpoint of the literary historian. But very few people bother to ponder the difference between the two viewpoints. Fewer still bother to ask whether the principle, the definitions of something in history, must be or can be applied to literature without some adjustment. One obvious difference is that the historical viewpoint still popular in so many Departments of Literature is not consistent with the ordinary reader's actual experience of the texts. If the reader is properly cued in this traditional philosophy, he will be influenced by the historical

approach. Reading a text in the light of a tradition, he will be looking for traits corresponding to a classical period, or periods of decay and then of renewal. These preconceptions are bound to hide the real nature of a text, its intrinsic inalienable traits.

But if the reader is estranged from the teaching orthodoxy, or if that orthodoxy some day collapses, as happens time and again, he will find that literature still endures. Quite a few "natural" readers arrive at a full enjoyment of literature without ever puzzling to know who came first and on whom the anxiety of influence exerted itself (something especially true of readers reading a literature other than that to which they were exposed at school). This is one of the strongest reasons for finding the traditional approach to literature a limited one. I am not saying that it is necessarily obsolete, but that it is narrow, and sometimes dangerously so. The traditional teaching of literature tends to substitute the author for the text, or the period for the text, or the social class for the text, or any kind of discipline or approach for the experience of literature proper.

*But surely American New Criticism didn't do that. American New Criticism is talking about the text. Well, let's go to the other extreme, of ignoring certain periods altogether.*

In giving greater importance to the text, the New Critics tended to ignore the relationship between text and reader. This has been corrected, to some extent, by the development of reader response criticism, which I initiated in this country. I didn't even know I was first, and had to wait for Stanley Fish one day to say publicly that a 1959 paper of mine was indeed the starting point.<sup>1</sup> The New Critics' contribution can never be exaggerated. But they did paint themselves into a corner by refusing to consider the pre-eminent role of the reader. The reader comes very close to replacing the author, and yet he cannot come into his own except within the text's constraints. So you have a dialectical relationship that cannot be ignored.

*You made the remark that your work has taken into account reception aesthetics, reader responses and so forth, and yet you talk mainly about the ordinary reader. You do not give that reader any kind of descriptive category as such, or even a name. I don't recall in your works the reader acquiring a name like the implied reader, or the competent reader, and so forth.*

Again in my 1959 paper I had proposed the concept of the superreader (*archilecteur*), and I used it as late as in the 1966 paper that triggered a controversy with Jakobson and Levi-Strauss about Baudelaire's poem on "Les Chats."<sup>2</sup> It was not a real reader. In fact, I gave up the name, if not the practice, because I felt it was a misleading misnomer, for it seemed to suggest that there could be a superior or good reader. Actually the name referred to a heuristic system, a purely conventional tool of exploration for temporary use only, since it was limited to a preliminary stage of decoding. It was meant to enable critics and theorists alike to collect facts about the text and, in so doing, to go beyond the limitations of a single reading, or the idiosyncratic quirks of an isolated reader. I would collect a number of

readings for a text and I would list the points in that text that elicited reactions. Then I would dismiss the contents of the reactions and keep only the list of the passages to which readers had reacted. Instead of having reactions to points spread, evenly or not, throughout the text, I found they were concentrated on certain spots, indicating where the structures surface in the guise of devices that compelled the natural reader's attention, that controlled and guided his decoding of the text's message. My next step was to describe these devices and determine the rules governing them. Once the rules are found, the devices can be identified analytically, without having to resort to empirical but cumbersome scanning. What you have, in effect, is a reader who keeps reading. Even though the superreader was only a scanning procedure, it approximated actual reading. It did very quickly what a natural reader does slowly when he keeps reading and rereading, when he discovers relations with other texts. He then reaches the level of intertextual reading and becomes capable of integrating his culture, whether personal or national, into his reading. All these stages are subject to rules that are constant and affect all speakers of a language. Thus anybody is capable of reading properly, without the benefit of formal training. Of course, not everybody is capable of explaining, or even becoming aware of, the procedures he instinctively follows.

*But this takes me back to a question I asked. Are you now content therefore with a kind of common reader, a common reader though who is capable of doing the next thing?*

A reader is a person capable of reading a text in its totality by relying entirely on his linguistic competence — a linguistic competence similar to, if not necessarily equal to, that of the author.

*This reader is not inscribed in the text at all?*

The reader certainly is controlled by the text. I am not sure what it means to say that he is inscribed in the text.

*I mean is there a specific reader who not so much controls, but who is a kind of ideal recipient of the text, so that the text is actually speaking to that ideal reader and that the act of reading, therefore, is to read the text mediated by the ideal reader to whom the text is speaking? This would be true of texts which have a class bias, which are meant for a particular class, which have the language of that class, etc. Yes, I was simply talking about the way in which, shall we say, a particular language formation in the text presupposes an ideal reader and the only way in which we can therefore read that text is through the mediation of this ideal reader. In other words, becoming the ideal reader of that text.*

Well, I don't know what an ideal reader looks like. Suppose the ideal reader were someone whose linguistic competence reflects the same social structures as the text. How could we know? How would we know that our reading comes close to this ideal reader? I can think of one case where the text imposes a certain type of reading: when the text visibly omits certain elements, we must then complete what is missing. This compulsory filling-in catches the reader in a framework of representations and makes him

perform the textual score more faithfully, thus more ideally, than would be the case if the text made explicit everything and did the work for him. One of my recent papers deals with hermeneutic models that are precisely such constraints, denying the reader the luxury of superficial reading, or of a reading which allows him to take his pick.<sup>3</sup>

*You have spoken about words, for instance, which are permanently poetic. That's a concept that escapes me at times. How could you defend the idea that words are permanently poetic — there are certain words which are permanently correct?*

I don't defend it. I am simply stating a fact of literary life in some societies where words are deemed poetic by virtue of a convention. They are not permanently poetic in the sense that no matter where they occur they would elicit a feeling recognised, or rationalised, as "poeticity." They are permanently poetic in the sense that if they are given prominence and are valorised or activated by context, then it will look as if their poetic value came from outside the text, as if this value depended not on the sign itself but on the external, non-verbal object it refers to. An example of this phenomenon can be found in descriptive poetry, where convention has singled out moments in time (dawn, sunset, midnight) and places (summits, promontories, vantage points, and their opposites, vales and dales); the words designating them come to form the nuclei in clusters of themes and motifs, places become topoi. Hence the formation of a prepoeticised lexicon. The poeticity of it, however, still has to be activated by the context, and conversely can be cancelled out by it.

*I get the feeling that a text is ultimately a transformation in your system of a fundamental opposition which takes the form of either x versus y, or a and not b.*

That is close to what I have in mind, yes. I don't know that the two formulas you just posited would take care of all cases, but you are not off the mark. Generally speaking, I hold that a matrix owes its generative power to its being paradoxical; it puts together extreme opposites that the sociolect keeps apart, or it puts asunder members of indissoluble dyads that normally make sense together only (like a predicate and its subject, a proposition and its presuppositions). Derivations from a matrix are bound therefore to depart from ordinary usage, and to produce indirection of meaning in ways not limited to the elementary polarity of figurative and literal.

*What I am really trying to get at is to what extent is this not a feature of very early, almost primitive structuralism?*

This does not bother me. If literary phenomena are best described in structural terms, so be it. What I would like to say, however, is that I separate completely the notion of structure from any ideology attached to the structuralist label. And if the prevailing view in structuralism is that the relationship between a structural invariant and its variants is static, I reject that aspect of structuralism also. This is where semiotics takes over, since it recognises only transformations *ad infinitum*, the continuous or unlimited

semiosis that inspired Peirce's triadic model: for a sign to have meaning, it has to refer to an object (another sign, rather than a "thing") by means of another representation, the interpretant, which is yet another sign. And the interpretant in turn requires a similar system in order to be understood. Hence an ultimate circularity that covers an entire semantic field. A text, from variant to variant, from interpretant to interpretant, brings the reader back to its matrix, and this beginning then demands to be verified anew by rereading, since the reader is confronting anew the initial puzzlement.

*You have said that the matrix never really occurs in the surface text itself.*

It appears only through successive actualisations. The exception seems to be irony, in which the parodying text must have as its matrix a representation that is already a surface phenomenon, the parodied text.

*But what is the status of the matrix? Is it nothing more than a set of abstractions which hasn't been semanticised?*

It is indeed a minimal and literal hypothetical sentence, that the text actualises by developing it into a periphrasis or a series of periphrases. Since these make use of other representations, they are not necessarily figurative. Their link to the matrix is found at the semic level: a sememe is nothing but an inchoate sentence, as Umberto Eco puts it. There are instances where the matrix is just such an inchoate sentence, but one made productive by the self-contradictory cancellation of a seme or by the replacement of a seme with its reverse. The text then is literally an effort to actualise verbally this semantic outrage, in order to come to terms with it, in order to make it acceptable or imaginable through a series of representations, which in turn will raise other difficulties, further challenge sociolectically accepted equivalencies or synonymies, and keep the reader on his toes. The basic mechanism is the interplay of opposites at the semic level.

*You mean like evil and non-evil?*

Yes. *Evil* is a bit large, but let's say *femininity* as opposed to *masculinity*, *solidity* as opposed to *fluidity*.

*Let me ask you about your own antecedents. Are there theoreticians you feel indebted to? Kristeva perhaps, Lotman more likely? And, of course, Bakhtin?*

The two scholars from Russia rather than Kristeva. Kristeva was only an intermediary, but the first ones to hit upon the notion of intertextuality were Lotman and Bakhtin.

*If I were to ask you to comment on the advance the Semiotics of Poetry made on The Structure of the Artistic Text, where would you locate the advance?<sup>24</sup>*

In the concept of mobility, of a constantly changing perception of the text which explains why a text never ceases to be active: the fact that a reader can never verify his interpretation, his perception of "significance"



without rereading at the level of "meaning", a process that exposes him again to the same difficulties he encountered at first, to the same incompatibilities between the sociolect and the text's idiolect that can be solved only at the level of significance. Bakhtin deserves a place in the pantheon of great men. If I were to say something critical about the Russian formalists and the Tartu semioticians, it is that with the exception of Bakhtin, their reading of texts is not as good as their theory. The success of any theory lies in its practice, the proof of the pudding.

*To what extent are you conscious of yourself as a product of a particular moment in history — a particular moment in history that reflects a conjunction of structuralism and semiotics and an acceptance by academics and intellectuals of that conjunction? In other words, would Professor Riffaterre survive history or is he not simply yet another product of historical conjunctions?*

Obviously, whatever results I may have achieved have been made possible by a combination of circumstances and by historical conditions. In my case, it was mostly a matter of where I was working — the fact that I left the French academic scene where I would most likely have been silenced for this country where people are more tolerant intellectually. The pressure of orthodoxy is less stifling here than anywhere else.

*America, I take it, redeems history.*

Exactly.

*It seems to me that in your analysis, you tend to give the impression of being an early deconstructionist. Let me cite a few examples. Many of your analyses deal with a word in a poem. Recently you have commented on "smokeless" in Wordsworth's "Earth has not anything to show more fair," "glazed" in William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow."<sup>5</sup> In Semiotics of Poetry you analyse Hugo's use of the Latin word *tibicine*. Now what I'm getting at is that deconstructionists may make the same claims about these words as you do by saying that these are precisely the words which rupture or fracture representation, and that the ideology and "organicity" and "univocality" of texts are being problematised or questioned.*

I take the opposite view: the words that challenge sociolectic acceptability increase the constraints and limitations upon possible interpretations. Deconstructionists however may chance upon the controlling words.

*You say "chance upon." You don't think that they would locate precisely such words.*

Even though they may find the relevant words, they are at a disadvantage when it comes to demonstrating that these are the right words indeed. The way to these words is dictated by the text. The text controls the reactions of the reader to a considerable extent. Instead of "fracturing" the text, these words propose another way of reading it. The ways of reading are not undecidable. The relevant words impose a most

decidable reading. Only it is different from what we expected. This is where I part company with deconstruction. I don't think that deciphering a text is ever an impossibility. Texts are built so as to be fully read, even though they may not lead us to this readily.

*My point really is, why should the deconstructionist locate precisely these words?*

Because these words are given such a preferential treatment by the text that it is really hard to be obdurate and not to see that there is something peculiar happening at this or that point of the verbal sequence. Fracturing occurs through intertextuality, in the conflict between text and intertext.

*Now the students of the sociology of literature too have complaints about your refusal to confront the ideological determinants of both criticism and reading. Is this just blindness on your part, or a conscious denial of the adequacy of sociological readings of literary texts? What I detect is a certain fetishisation of the aesthetic going on in your works. The whole question of the exacting and laborious nature of text production, the distribution and dissemination of literary texts within a "free" economy — these are features that do not emerge in your discourse.*

It is not a conscious denial; it's a conscious postponement. Reintroducing the ideological determinants should be a secondary, not a primary aspect of the reading process. I have no problem with normal readers. But when a critic tries, in the light of his own ideology, to force the text into a given frame, his approach seems to me to blind him to the reality of the text. These behavioural quirks are external to the text and therefore none of my concern. I do not claim to solve all problems. I fear however that those who practise the sociology of literature superimpose an ideological grid that prevents them from seeing whatever in the text does not fit their preconceptions.

*If you confess that there are certain things that you do not claim to solve, are any of these things major gaps that need to be solved?*

Yes, but at a secondary stage. Let's first explore how the text itself points to such gaps and prepares the reader for a specific conflict between his ideology and what the text propounds.

*Well, let me rephrase that in a slightly more succinct fashion. Would you say that literature has a social function or, somewhat more schematically, is the conscience of civilisation?*

I don't know about civilisation. I know something about the sociolects, the mythological traces left by civilisation in language. I am concerned only with the language that a text uses. The text itself is what defines the relevance of critical activity.

*Finally, what of the future? What does Professor Riffaterre propose to do now?*

Well, I propose to expand my exploration of intertextuality by focusing on works longer than poems. If a text puts constraints on reader reactions, one must explain why neither greater length nor complexity can weaken this hold the text has on interpretation. It seems to me the domain of the narrative is a likely place in which to find an answer to these questions.

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- <sup>1</sup> Michael Riffaterre, "Criteria for Style Analysis," *Word*, 15 (1959), 154-74.
- <sup>2</sup> Riffaterre, "Describing Poetic Structures: Two Approaches to Baudelaire's *Les Chats*," *Yale French Studies*, 36-37 (1966), 200-42. Rpt. in J. Ehrmann, *Structuralism* (New York: Archer Books, 1970). Both papers appeared in a considerably revised French version in Riffaterre's *Essais de stylistique structurale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1971).
- <sup>3</sup> Riffaterre, "Hermeneutic Models," *Poetics Today*, 4 (1983), 7-16.
- <sup>4</sup> Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978); Jurij Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, trans. Ronald Vroon, Michigan Slavic Contributions, No. 7 (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 1977).
- <sup>5</sup> See Riffaterre, "Intertextual Representation," *Critical Inquiry*, 11, No. 1 (September 1984), and *Semiotics of Poetry*, pp. 26-27.